

States Code, who is undergoing medical recuperation or therapy, or is otherwise in the status of "medical hold", in a military treatment facility for an injury, illness, or disease incurred or aggravated while on active duty in the Armed Forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom shall not, during any month in which so entitled, be required to pay any charge for meals provided such member by the military treatment facility.

(2) **EFFECTIVE DATE.**—The limitation in paragraph (1) shall take effect on January 1, 2005, and shall apply with respect to meals provided members of the Armed Forces as described in that paragraph on or after that date.

(b) **TELEPHONE BENEFITS.**—

(1) **PROVISION OF ACCESS TO TELEPHONE SERVICE.**—The Secretary of Defense shall provide each member of the Armed Forces who is undergoing in any month medical recuperation or therapy, or is otherwise in the status of "medical hold", in a military treatment facility for an injury, illness, or disease incurred or aggravated while on active duty in the Armed Forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom access to telephone service at or through such military treatment facility in an amount for such month equivalent to the amount specified in paragraph (2).

(2) **MONTHLY AMOUNT OF ACCESS.**—The amount of access to telephone service provided a member of the Armed Forces under paragraph (1) in a month shall be the number of calling minutes having a value equivalent to \$40.

(3) **ELIGIBILITY AT ANY TIME DURING MONTH.**—A member of the Armed Forces who is eligible for the provision of telephone service under this subsection at any time during a month shall be provided access to such service during such month in accordance with that paragraph, regardless of the date of the month on which the member first becomes eligible for the provision of telephone service under this subsection.

(4) **USE OF EXISTING RESOURCES.**—In carrying out this subsection, the Secretary shall maximize the use of existing Department of Defense telecommunications programs and capabilities, private organizations, or other private entities offering free or reduced-cost telecommunications services.

(5) **COMMENCEMENT.**—

(A) **IN GENERAL.**—This subsection shall take effect on the first day of the first month beginning on or after the date of the enactment of this Act.

(B) **EXPEDITED PROVISION OF ACCESS.**—The Secretary shall commence the provision of access to telephone service under this subsection as soon as practicable after the date of the enactment of this Act.

(6) **TERMINATION.**—The Secretary shall cease the provision of access to telephone service under this subsection on the date this is 60 days after the later of—

(A) the date, as determined by the Secretary, on which Operation Enduring Freedom terminates; or

(B) the date, as so determined, on which Operation Iraqi Freedom terminates.

Mr. OBAMA. Mr. President, today I am offering an amendment to the fiscal year 2005 emergency supplemental which I am pleased to announce is being cosponsored by Senators CORZINE, BINGAMAN, and GRAHAM. This amendment would meet certain needs of our injured service members in recognition of the tremendous sacrifice they have made in defense of our country.

The other day I had the opportunity to visit some of our wounded heroes at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. I know many of you have made the same trip. I heard about their visits, but there is nothing that can fully prepare you for what you see when you take that first step into the physical therapy room.

These are kids in there, our kids, the ones we watched grow up, the ones we hoped would live lives that were happy, healthy, and safe. These kids left their homes and families for a dangerous place halfway around the world. After years of being protected by their parents, these kids risk their lives to protect us. Now some of them have come home from that war with scars that may change their lives forever, scars that may never heal. Yet they sit there in the hospital so full of hope and still so proud of their country. They are the best that America has to offer, and they deserve our highest respect, and they deserve our help.

Recently, I learned that some of our most severely wounded soldiers are being forced to pay for their own meals and their own phone calls while being treated in medical hospitals. Up until last year, there was a law on the books that prohibited soldiers from receiving both their basic subsistence allowance and free meals from the military. Basically, this law allowed the Government to charge our wounded heroes for food while they were recovering from their war injuries. Thankfully, this body acted to change this law in 2003 so that wounded soldiers would not have to pay for their meals. But we are dealing with a bureaucracy here and, as we know, nothing is ever simple in a bureaucracy. So now, because the Department of Defense does not consider getting physical rehabilitation or therapy services in a medical hospital as being hospitalized, there are wounded veterans who still do not qualify for the free meals other veterans receive. After 90 days, even those classified as hospitalized on an outpatient status lose their free meals as well.

Also, while our soldiers in the field qualify for free phone service, injured service men and women who may be hospitalized hundreds or thousands of miles from home do not receive this same benefit. For soldiers whose family members are not able to take off work and travel to a military hospital, hearing the familiar voice of mom or dad or husband or wife on the other side of the phone can make all the difference in the world. Yet right now our Government will not help pay for these calls, and it will not help pay for these meals.

Now, think about the sacrifices these young people have made for their country, many of them literally sacrificing life and in some cases limb. Now, at \$8.30 a meal, they could end up with a \$250 bill from the Government that sent them to war, and they could get that bill every single month. This is wrong, and we have a moral obligation

to fix it. The amendment I am offering today will do this.

The amendment will expand the group of hospitalized soldiers who cannot be charged for their meals to include those service members undergoing medical recuperation, therapy, or otherwise on "medical hold." The number of people affected by this amendment will be small. Only about 4,000 service members are estimated to fall under the category of non-hospitalized. The amendment is retroactive to January 1, 2005, in an effort to provide those injured service members who may have already received bills for their meals with some relief from these costs.

The amendment will also extend free phone service to those injured service members who are hospitalized or otherwise undergoing medical recuperation or therapy. I am very proud this amendment is supported by the American Legion, and I hope my colleagues will join them in that support. I ask all of my colleagues to join me in supporting this amendment. It should be something that is very simple for us to do. These are our children and they risked their lives for us. When they come home with injuries, we should be expected to provide them the best possible service and the best possible support. This is a small price to pay for those who have sacrificed so much for their country.

I want to mention and extend my thanks to the senior Senator from Alaska and my colleague from Mississippi for working with me on this issue. I am hoping that we can reach an agreement on this bill.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

Mr. COCHRAN. Mr. President, I thank the Senator for the explanation of his amendment. There is one thing, in looking at the amendment, that I am not sure of, and I am wondering if he could advise the Senate. Does the Senator have an estimate from anyone at the Department of Defense or in the Hospital Services Agency of the Department of Defense as to what the costs of the amendment would be during the balance of this fiscal year?

Mr. OBAMA. Yes, I do. DOD currently charges soldiers \$8.30 per day for meals at the nondiscounted rate. So if all the eligible soldiers ate all of their meals at military facilities through the end of this fiscal year, the amendment would cost about \$10.2 million. Now, that is probably a high estimate because my expectation would be these wounded soldiers would not be eating all of their meals at the hospital. So it would probably end up being lower, but the upper threshold would be \$10.2 million.

Mr. COCHRAN. I thank the Senator. I think the Senator certainly hits upon a subject that we are very sensitive about at this time. We are following very closely the situation of the servicemen who are participating in the war against terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. We are proud of